

**Citizen Journalism in Surabaya's Local Media**  
[Media and Communication Studies]

## The Implementation of Citizen Journalism in Surabaya's Local Media

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### **Abstract**

*It is ordinary people who 'simply' share what they see and feel about events associated with the public through the media. In Indonesia, the growing phenomenon of citizen journalism is more open to freedom of expression and information and communication technology support. On the other hand, the current mass media also provides a space in which people can participate to share information or their opinions. Surabaya, as the second largest city in Indonesia, is one of the centers of industry, commerce, and education in this country. Therefore the role of the local media as a source of information and communication is very important. Some local media has occupied a very important position in the decision-making process and in shaping public opinion. In this study, researchers focused on local online media in Surabaya: [www.beritajatim.com](http://www.beritajatim.com) and local radio: Radio Suara Surabaya. These two media outlets provide public space to accommodate the information and opinions from the public. This study aimed to observe the practice of citizen journalism in these two media outlets. Research results indicate the practice of citizen journalism in [www.beritajatim.com](http://www.beritajatim.com) is used as promotion and public relations. In Radio Suara Surabaya, the practice of citizen journalism inclines more toward the democratic process, especially in influencing public policies.*

**Keywords:** *citizen journalism, democratization, local media, online media, local radio*

## Introduction

Ordinary people are the ones who informally report through media what they see and feel. They are the so-called citizen journalists. The basic concept in citizen journalism is positioning the audience as the producers of news, instead of merely as the passive consumers of news, which has always been the logical framework of mass-media-based mainstream journalism work. In other words, the barriers that define the positions of journalists as the researchers and writers of news, as the resources of news, and as the audiences as consumers of the news have all come tumbling down. We can no longer rigidly identify the distinction of producers and consumers because everyone can have both roles (Gillmor, 2004).

More and more audience members are now contributing to media; they no longer simply consume the media, which has always been the case before now. Nowadays society is the eyes and ears of media, and they report hard news. Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis in *We Media* define participatory journalism as “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires” (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9).

Society members who used to be passive audience members who only received information are now participating in sharing information as well as giving updates of the information. In fact, information from these citizen journalists often comes earlier than information from the mainstream media, as what happened in a terrorist attack in Mumbai on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

That night when no one could be certain of what really happened, micro blogging sites were the dependable sources of information for most people in Mumbai. The problem is that even after the bomb had exploded for 10 minutes, not one media reported the news (Widyasmoro in Intisari, 2009).

This piece of story shows the power of citizen journalism, which is able to be the source of information in the midst of crisis, when mainstream media are not able to gain access to the story location. Stuart Allan believes that news coverage

and report from witnesses (citizen journalism) give a very vital contribution, especially in disasters or tragedies (Allan, 2009, p. 8).

In addition to giving the first report from the news location, the practice of citizen journalism is also closely related to the culture of democracy in a country. Simon Cottle said that citizen journalism, even though it is not without an historical precedence, has developed rapidly in the past years and it expresses the culture, the organization structure, and the politics of the people (Allan, 2009, p. xi). One of the indicators of democracy is the freedom of expression; the freedom to voice an opinion.

Citizen journalism is a form of expression from an independent ordinary society member and it (should) not be influenced by any power. Therefore, the portrait of citizen journalism in a country can generally represent the political turmoil and the democratic process in the country.

In Indonesia, in the regime of New Order, the government built up the development journalism through the means of TVRI and RRI, which no doubt was their means of propaganda. TVRI and RRI had the legal right to monopolize the production of news. Other media were obliged to relay the news programs from TVRI and RRI. Any media that had the courage to voice any critiques or opinions against the government would be subdued. In short, the atmosphere of mass media in the era of New Order was far away from freedom.

This situation totally changed after the reformation. Because of the freedom from numerous complicated licensing procedures, there were many new media outlets established with new journalism colors—peace journalism was one of them. The press also found the courage to discuss the issues of politics, gender, and cultural diversities, which was very dangerous to discuss before the reformation.

In addition to independent media specialized to accommodate citizen journalists, mainstream media also give some of their space for citizen journalists. Those media include *Media Indonesia*, *Republika*, *Kompas*, *MetroTV*, *Radio Elshinta*, *Radio Suara Surabaya*.

Since the invention of the printing press, non-professional writers have shared information in the form of pamphlets and brochures. However, this early form of citizen journalism had problems: the information could only be shared with a limited number of people and the production process took time and money. With the arrival of the Web 2.0 era, information sharing with billions of Internet users all over the world has finally become true (Jurrat, 2011, p. 6). Information can now be shared in a very short time and at relatively little cost.

The result is that millions of citizen journalists share their experiences and information online. They bring issues that are not or cannot be covered by mainstream media. At the international level, citizen journalism holds a very important role in crisis. An example of that is the witnesses' reports in the 9/11 event, or those of the violence to the demonstrators in the 2009 Iraqi presidential election. Therefore, a lot of professional journalists and academicians hail citizen journalism as a more transparent and democratic journalism (Jurrat, 2011, p. 6).

Professional journalists gain many benefits from information technology and media. Citizen journalists do as well. They report their own news using simple media technology such as camera, cellular phone, and Internet blogging. "With the new media technologies and the involvement of citizens to report their own news in their own way and about events in their communities, one would say that the news is everywhere and that there is nowhere to hide" (Gbandia, 2010, p. 3).

The production process of news used to be the responsibility of the editorial team of a mass media outlet. Santana (2005, p. 193) said that news was generally produced through the process of a reporter researching and compiling facts, performing check and recheck, and proposing it to the editor. The editor would be the one responsible for editing the news draft. If more information was needed, the editor would ask the reporter to look for and add more facts. The final draft would then go through the processes of lay-out, printing, and distribution.

In radio the editorial management system is a little different from print media. The radio has gatekeepers who are responsible for filtering information into news that is worthy of broadcast. In other media, gatekeepers are the

equivalent of editors. In the book *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies* it is mentioned that a gatekeeper is the one responsible for filtering events, as to whether they are interesting or uninteresting, important or unimportant (Franklin et al., 2005).

The reality, however, has now changed. The process of news production is no longer the monopoly of an editorial team in a mass media conglomerate. Big, global media such as BBC and CNN actively utilize the contributions of their audiences in news (Quinn & Lamble, 2008, p. 44).

Priambodo RH from Dr. Soetomo Press Institute said that the development of citizen journalism is in the phase of a cocoon at the moment; it is yet to be in the phase of a butterfly. Therefore we still need lots of learning to bring forth beautiful citizen journalism. Numerous professional reporters are doubtful if non-trained people are able to write responsible news. Some say that the existence of the Internet has created a tsunami of information. The Internet contains mostly copy-paste and rubbish (Harsono, 2010, p. 61).

However, it is a fact that citizen journalists never get any journalistic training and knowledge like that of professional journalists.. Therefore, not all citizen journalists obey the ethics and standards of professional journalists. There are a great number of citizen journalists who do not know about the ethics of journalism. These citizen journalists operate from a very personal point of view, if not biased, in their reports.

One event with a fatal effect started from a citizen journalism practice in CNN iReport on 3 October 2008. A “johntw” wrote that Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple, suffered from a cardiac arrest and had to be sent to a hospital. As a result, a couple of minutes after the news was released, Apple stocks plunged for 17 months.

That sparked the start of the critique of citizen journalism. News released or broadcasted by mass media is required to be accurate and trustworthy for the audience. Indeed not many mainstream media outlets are open to or positive about the existence of citizen journalism. Their reasons for objection range from the issue of accuracy, objectivity, honesty, balance, verification, and ethics. On top of

that, as Dan Gillmor (2004) said, mainstream media is afraid of losing its privilege as the monopoly of truth and the sole producer of information.

Technology that relies on speed has caused censor bypass toward the press. Subject matters discussed are no longer limited or corrected. Everything can be read and seen on the Internet. In another way, This new media exposes consumers to low quality news and information. Gbandia in *New Media and Its Effects on Journalism and Media Development-Citizen Journalism* said “propaganda messages which sometimes lack substance are passed around through mobile phones and the Internet. This therefore questions the objectivity sometimes of citizen journalism” (Gbandia, 2010, p. 4).

The ‘Steve Jobs’ incident in iCNN has triggered the debate about the accuracy of citizen journalism and it shows “how it takes only a few minutes for a scurrilous rumor, placed on a site without sufficient editorial checks, to inflict damage” (Harmanci, 2008, p. 6).

In Indonesia, meanwhile, the development of media is very rapid. Mainstream media have opened opportunities for citizens to participate in providing information.

Surabaya is the second biggest city in Indonesia. This city is one of the centers of industry, commerce, and education in this country. Therefore the role of local mass media as a source of information and communication is critical. Some local mass media outlets have placed themselves in an important position in the process of decision making and public opinion construction.

Local media in Surabaya include print media, electronic media, and online media. In this study, the researchers focus on two local media outlets in Surabaya, which are Radio Suara Surabaya and [www.beritajatim.com](http://www.beritajatim.com). In 1984 Radio Suara Surabaya was the first media outlet in Surabaya to provide an interactive space for public.. Meanwhile, the web portal [beritajatim](http://beritajatim.com) was the first web portal in Surabaya, being online since 1 April 2006. This site has since provided a public space, which is Kabar Anda, for the people to give their contributions of information.



The statement of the problem in this study is **“The Implementation of Citizen Journalism in Surabaya’s Local Media.”**

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **1. Online Journalism**

According to De Wolk in Franklin et al (2005), online journalism can be described as quality news and information uploaded on the Internet. Online journalism refers then not simply to digital versions of news found elsewhere but has evolved to become a source of endless amounts of original content found only on the Internet (Fusco, 2010, p. 6).

In Indonesia, online news portals emerged for the first time in 1998. Indonesia was in turmoil because of political upheaval. There were demonstrations in several large cities, such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta, and Makassar. A number of incidents occurred, resulting in numerous significant changes in this country, including the decline of the Rupiah exchange value, the increase in prices of staple goods, victims of demonstrations gone bad, and transfer of power. The people needed information as fast as possible, right after those incidents occurred. Print media and electronic media (television and radio) needed time to publish news. This necessity was answered by detik.com, the first online news portal in Indonesia.

### **2. Local Media**

The regional autonomy policies initiated and applied to the bureaucracy system in Indonesia have also produced the freedom of the local media existence at the provincial level, making those media outlets grow like mushrooms in the rainy season. Many local media outlets have started to brighten Indonesian media. In addition to printed media, electronic media such as television and even online media also share information in a local context.

The local media has not just brightened up Indonesian media. In the context of democracy, the existence of local media holds a very important function. The growth of democracy in a local level (provincial level) could not

be ignored as a result of the media being responsible for informing the public about the issues of citizenship, democratization of the country and public politic (LSPP, 2005, p. 5). This has also made the local media a part in regulating the regional autonomy policies.

There have been some fairly significant issues in the existence of the local media in performing their function. According to research carried out by Lembaga Studi Pers dan Pembangunan (The Institute for Press and Development Studies) in 2005 (p. 6), the issues of regional autonomy policies and decentralization as well as the inexistence of media mechanism have put the local media in a dilemma—to be an agent of democracy or an agent of industry. In addition to that, the issue of the short supply of journalists with sufficient professional journalistic skills is the next problem (LSPP, 2005, p. 54). On top of all that, they still have to face the weakness of internal management, in the editorial team as well as in the marketing team. Another problem arising is the issue of press independence—it is a crucial issue in the effort of building the press control capacity as the watchdog in the regional democratization process (LSPP, 2005, p. 58).

### **3. News**

News is a journalistic product whose products are deemed important and interesting for the public (Stovall, 2005, p. 2). An event has to have the following values to be news-worthy: timeliness, conflict, impact, prominence of the person(s), geographical and psychological proximity, bizarre or unusual.

The characteristics above are criteria for an event to be deemed worthy of news published in mainstream media. However, in the practice of citizen journalism, those criteria are not always met because citizen journalists do not get special journalistic training.

### **4. Citizen Journalism**

Bentley (2008, p. 2) considers citizen journalism as no more a replacement for professional journalism than teabags are a replacement for water. Each of

them can stand by itself comfortably, but when combined will produce extraordinary things. Citizen journalists do not want newsroom assignments. They have stories to tell. And they want to tell the stories because the professional journalists are too busy with the big stories. While in fact, simple stories can be significant to the audience.

According to Nugraha (2012, p. xi), citizen journalism is the activity of ordinary citizens (not professional reporters) in gathering the facts of an event in the field. They compile, write, and report their coverage in social media. Pepih also finds that in its development, what the citizens report are not always events; they also report opinions from the society in response of an event, locally or nationally. Another important thing about citizen journalism is that the citizens are not paid. Ordinary citizens include homemakers, students, teachers or professors, as well as blue-collar workers, and they are not limited to sex, age, or groups.

Two important things that have to do citizen journalism (Nugraha, 2012, p. 85) are to be curious and skeptical.

Meanwhile, Rich (2010, p. 11) said that the concept of public journalism has developed into the so-called citizen journalism, where citizens give their contributions by means of blog and interactive online forums. A controversy has arisen whether citizens who are not employed by a news organization can be called journalists; however, this movement is indeed a significant force in today's mass media.

## **Methodology**

This research will use the qualitative method and the researchers will do case studies because according to Yin (2009, p. 1) in study cases the focus of a research will be on the contemporary phenomenon. The citizen journalism phenomenon has had a rapid development in line with the growth of communication and information technology.

In its application, case studies generally use relatively extensive interviews, or even observations, to recognize the life (such as the

development, behavior, appearance) of the researched analysis unit. In addition to interview and observation, case studies often involve idiographic interpretation which emphasizes certain issues, such as the social actions and social relationships influenced by the existing social contexts (Miller, 1996, p. 168 in Pawito, 2007, p. 145).

In this research, the researchers will interview Dwi Eko Lokononto (the chief editor of *beritajatim.com*) and Errol Jonathans (the CEO of Suara Surabaya Media). The result of the interview will be analyzed and verified with field observation.

## **Result and Discussion**

The majority of news in Radio Suara Surabaya is reports from citizen journalists. An interesting thing is that the initiative first came from the citizens. It started when there was a big flood in a couple of spots in Surabaya in 1994. At that time, Suara Surabaya (SS) reporters were reporting in the middle of the flood. Not long after that, some audience members who happened to be around also made calls to SS to support the SS reporters' coverage.

At that point in time, SS Radio only had an operator instead of gatekeepers like they do now. Because there were numerous calls from citizens, the operator was overwhelmed. Errol Jonathans eventually made the policy that would later become the pioneer of citizen journalism in SS. Those callers were asked to report on air and they interacted directly with the radio broadcaster to share their information.

Although SS already opened the opportunity for citizens to give reportage, at that time SS did not use the term 'citizen journalism.' Errol termed it 'interactive journalism.' To SS, the citizens play the role of reporters: to see, to observe, and to report (Haryono, 2010). The reportage portion by these citizen journalists even reaches 100% of the programs in Radio Suara Surabaya. "Kelana Kota", the program, is on air 24-hour non stop on SS.

The news portal *beritajatim.com* went online for the first time on April 1, 2006. As implied from the name, the focus of information coverage of this news

portal is East Java province. On [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com) almost all news is produced by professional journalists. But since the start of its site, this news portal has provided a special column called “Kabar Anda” for citizen journalists to report information. Citizen journalists send their information through email or SMS to the editors of [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com).

The information received by the editors—the chief editor or the managing editor in this case—will be verified by replying to the email or SMS. This is to ensure that the source sending the information does exist. Next, the editors will verify the events; either by confirming with the relevant sources or by the conventional way, which is by sending journalists to the field. Not all information will be published by the editors—some will not be published because the data cannot be verified. According to Eko, in online media coverage, the most crucial thing is to ensure if the information received is valid or not. “We always do direct cross-check with some relevant institutions. For example, we got news about an explosion in Banyuwangi. We directly cross-check the information with the local police office. If it is verified, our reporters are to follow up the information and news,” said Dwi Eko (from personal interview). “If the event has the news value relating to public interest, it is very likely that the information will be published as news on the site [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com).”

MacDougall in Kusumaningrat (2006, p. 15) considered journalism as the activity of collecting news, researching facts, and reporting events. The difference is that professional journalists have the responsibility to do reportage (because they are paid for it), while citizen journalists in SS or the site [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com) do reportage voluntarily, without any payment or obligation. Professional journalists do reportage because it is an assignment from a media institution, while citizen journalists do not see reportage as an assignment.

Two main journalistic products, according to Sumadiria (2006), are news (the most recent report on latest facts or ideas, which are interesting and or important to the majority, via regular media such as newspaper, radio, television, or online media) and opinion (response, in verbal or written form, to an issue, others’ responses, or the situation and condition of a surrounding area). Both are the

products of the citizen journalists in Radio Suara Surabaya and beritajatim.com. They share information based on what they see or experience.

On the site beritajatim.com, the information shared is not concerned only with events relating to the general public. Some not-for-profit and for-profit organizations also share information about their activities through the news portal beritajatim.com. This kind of information cannot be directly rejected by the editors of beritajatim.com because some of the information is needed by the public, or the readers of the site beritajatim.com in this case.

This indicates a weakness of citizen journalism, which is the problem of accuracy. In the process of information delivery by citizen journalists, it is common for the opinions of the resources to be conveyed in the information. Such a condition, which happens in both Suara Surabaya Radio and beritajatim.com, can reduce the accuracy of news. Another weakness is when the information shared by citizen journalists does not meet the components of news values.

Ishwara (2005) revealed the values that an event should have to make it newsworthy by mainstream media. Those values include: timeliness, proximity, impact, human interest, and prominence. In the researchers' observation, the most prominent values of the news in Radio Suara Surabaya as well as beritajatim.com are: timeliness, proximity, impact, and human interest. Meanwhile, on the site beritajatim.com, the common news values are: timeliness, proximity, and human interest. The news value of impact can hardly be conveyed in the information shared by citizen journalists. This is caused by promotion or publication done by for-profit or non-for-profit institutions.

The timeliness of a report cannot happen in mainstream media outlets, which rely on only professional journalists because of the limitation of their number. In addition to that, there will be the editing process, which naturally takes time. On the other hand, in citizen journalism there is minimal editing, resulting in well-timed information.

Looking at Steve Outing's classification, the citizen journalism in beritajatim.com is being classified as number one. The citizen journalism opens the space for public opinion. In the space, readers or audience can react to,

compliment, criticize, or add materials to professional journalism's work. In conventional printed media, this is known as letters to the editor.

The research classifies citizen journalism in Radio Suara Surabaya as hybrid, which is the work of (mainstream) professional media in combining the works of professional journalists and citizen journalists. Radio Suara Surabaya has more than 329,000 loyal listeners (data taken in 2009) who are ready to be voluntary reporters at anytime. However, that does not mean that the radio overlooks the need for professional journalists. Programs such as "Lintasan Informasi", "Sari Info", and "Lintasan Olahraga" are the work of Radio Suara Surabaya's editorial team. In addition to that the reports of citizen journalists are not without any editing when they are broadcast by SS.

This radio has a gatekeeper which functions as a filter, with journalistic standards. Why does it need a gatekeeper? It is because citizens tend to report with high subjectivity, if not with emotion. It is actually natural as the citizens report as they experience what they are reporting. This cannot be avoided because citizen journalists never acquire any journalistic training that would teach the objectivity of a journalist. Therefore, according to Haryono (2010, p. 49), a gatekeeper has to guide, direct, and even look for solutions. In Radio Suara Surabaya, every report from citizens has to go through a selection process from the editors. After that, there will be verification process to check the citizens' SMS or e-mail. If they exist, the report will be broadcasted.

Therefore, citizen journalism in Radio Suara Surabaya as well as in the site *beritajatim.com* is not on a par with pure citizen journalism, which is 100% independent such as personal websites or community media. The citizen journalism in Radio Suara Surabaya has boundaries according to journalistic rules, and the keeper of the boundaries are the editors of Suara Surabaya (the gatekeepers, the broadcasters, and the reporters). A similar thing occurs in *beritajatim.com*. As an online news media, the site *beritajatim.com*'s reportage content is based on *Pedoman Media Siber* (Cyber Media Guideline) issued by Dewan Pers on February 3, 2012. Dwi Eko admitted that before the guidelines came to existence, the editors of *beritajatim.com* had followed the common

journalistic rules. “At that time we only held onto data verification and accuracy,” said Dwi Eko (from personal interview).

Another thing to be paid attention to in the existence of citizen journalism is the impact of a piece of news. According to Ashadi Siregar, public issues can be defined as facts coming from public response to authority in general, and the government’s authority specifically. This public issue is afterward published freely (autonomously and independently) and objectively by the press as journalism information, which in turn becomes the source for the public opinion formation process. Public opinion can be interpreted as the citizens’ pro and contra response to actual public issues. This pro and contra dynamic will be the basis of public policy—regulations or deeds by the public officials in serving citizens (public service). The end of all this process is public service and the government’s accountability in democratic norms.

This process is also carried out by Radio Suara Surabaya. The first phase in SS is to do goal setting. Is the issue introduced to socialize something or to bring up contributions and suggestions? Or does SS want to invite citizens to test or criticize a policy? After the goal setting, SS will put the issue on air, and wait for the citizens’ response. It does not take long before the audience’s responses overflow, making them not so much fact reporters, but more of citizen journalists giving opinions. Usually almost all responses are negative, trying to criticize a reality.

As Goode (2009) said, the movement of citizen journalism does not signify the end of agenda-setting by elite or professional media organizations. Citizen journalism allows citizens to be involved and to give contributions to the agenda-setting formation process carried out by professional media.

For cases in relation to public policy, SS creates goal setting or agenda setting beforehand and guides the public to reach that goal. When an issue is published to the public, public opinions will be created, which will eventually be considerations for the public policy makers. Public sphere is the area where all citizens can interact, exchange mind, and debate on public issues, without worrying about any intervention from economic or politic elites (Sudibyo, 2004,



p. 70). This process cannot be found in the activity process of citizen journalists on the site [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com).

The reports by citizen journalism in [BeritaJatim.com](http://BeritaJatim.com) are on various events without having to be related with any topics or issues brought up by the editors. Most of the information sent to the editors of [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com) is promotional or imaging material from either service or goods businesses, or non-government organization. A lot of people also make use of the column “Kabar Anda” to promote their events. So how is the information filtered by the editors? “If the information is still useful for the public, and if it is informative, we let the information through. But if the information is hard-selling, we block it,” said Dwi Eko.

Different information content shared by citizen journalists is also determined by the type of these two local media. In Suara Surabaya Radio, the public call and share their information. They are even guided by the gatekeepers and broadcasters to be able to describe events in complete and clear details. Meanwhile, on [beritajatim.com](http://beritajatim.com), the public have to express their ideas and information in writing. The writings they send are usually very short, if not non-informative. This fact cannot be separated from the weak literacy in Indonesia. Data published by The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2012 stated that the literacy of Indonesian people is the lowest among 52 countries in East Asia ([www.antaranews.com](http://www.antaranews.com), January 19, 2012).

According to the text in the official site of Badan Arsip dan Perpustakaan Kota Surabaya (The Archives and Library Office of Surabaya), “It cannot be denied that Indonesian people, Surabaya people especially, are more familiar with the culture of listening than with the culture of reading. It is a sad truth that numerous research by experts have found that only 10% of Indonesian people can be categorized as intellectual and as people with a reading habit” (<http://digital-library.surabaya.go.id>). This condition leads to the lack of excitement of Surabayan people to embrace the opportunities opened by online media.

From the result of observations and interviews in this research, this research concludes that first, the Implementation of citizen journalism in Surabaya’s local

media depends on the educational background of the audience; second, audiences prefer to report to the radio because they just need to speak, not to write; third, the check and recheck process is easier in the radio than online media and, citizen journalism is going to be a learning process for audience in Surabaya towards democratization.

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